

School Breakfast Pilot Project Overview

Background

The School Breakfast Program (SBP), authorized by the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, started as a pilot program to provide funding for school breakfasts in poor areas and areas where children had to travel a great distance to school. The intent was to provide a nutritious breakfast to children who might otherwise not receive one. The importance of a nutritious breakfast is supported by several studies that appear to have linked it to improved dietary status and enhanced school performance. Most recent research suggests that providing schools breakfasts to low-income children is associated with greater likelihood of eating breakfast and significant improvements in children's cognitive, emotional, and psychological behavior, as well as in their school attendance and academic achievement.

In response to the growing body of evidence suggesting educational and dietary benefits from school breakfasts, many observers have urged that the availability of school breakfasts be expanded. Despite an increase in the number of schools offering the SBP, the percentage of students eating school breakfasts is considerably lower than the comparable percentage eating school lunch. Those eating school breakfasts are more likely to be poor and qualify for free or reduced-price breakfasts. It is possible that there is reduced participation in the SBP in part due to students' perceived stigma associated with the use of free and reduced-price school meals. One approach to increasing participation in the SBP is to offer breakfast free to all students, regardless of their ability to pay for meals. This would potentially remove the perceived stigma often associated with school breakfast, and result in more children (both poor and non-poor) participating. It is believed by some that a universal-free program would result in more children consuming a nutritious breakfast and beginning the school day with proper nutrition ready to learn.

However, expanding the SBP so that breakfasts are free to all students could substantially increase the cost to the federal government of subsidizing school breakfasts, should participation increase as proponents of universal-free breakfast believe. In a climate where public resources are constrained, it is critical to know whether these expenditures are worthwhile. Does the increase in participation in the SBP result in improved dietary intake, academic performance, and related classroom behaviors? Would these free breakfasts simply substitute for meals that students, particularly students from nonpoor households, would otherwise eat in the absence of the universal-free breakfast program?

Within this context, Congress passed Section 109 of the William F. Goodling Child Nutrition Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-336), which authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture, through the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), to conduct a pilot study that provides free school breakfasts to all students regardless of family income. An evaluation would rigorously assess the effects of this universal-free school breakfast program on program participation and a broad range of student outcomes, including academic achievement, school attendance and tardiness, classroom behavior and attentiveness, and dietary status.

The School Breakfast Pilot Project

General: Up to six school food authorities (SFAs) will be selected to participate in the School Breakfast Pilot Project for a period of three years beginning in the 2000-2001 school year.

Research Objectives: The legislation authorizing the School Breakfast Pilot Project requires the conduct of an evaluation that is to address four main research objectives:

- Determine the effect that participation by elementary schools in the pilot project has on the proportion of students who eat a breakfast, the paperwork required to be completed by the schools, and the subsequent costs to the schools and the federal government.
- Assess the effects of the universal-free breakfast program in elementary schools on selected student outcomes, including academic achievement, school attendance and tardiness, classroom behavior and discipline, and dietary intakes over the course of a day.
- Compare the characteristics and outcomes of the students participating in the universal-free breakfast program with those of non-participating students.
- Compare the characteristics and outcomes of the students participating in the universal-free breakfast program with those of students participating in the regular school breakfast program.

Implementation: Not all schools in the school districts selected to participate in the School Breakfast Pilot Project will provide breakfasts free to all students regardless of their household income. For those selected school districts, a limited number of pairs of schools (on average, about 12 elementary schools per district) would be chosen to be the focus of the evaluation. Within each pair of schools, one school would be randomly selected as a treatment school (offering universal-free breakfasts) and the other school within the pair would be designated a comparison school (offering regular school breakfast program). Those schools designated as comparison schools would continue to implement the school breakfast program as currently operated.

The evaluation will undertake a wide range of data collection activities involving the collection of school administrative data, the administration of achievement tests and cognitive tests, surveys of students and their parents, surveys of school and food service personnel, and site visits. School districts must agree to provide the required school records, and make available school and food service personnel for interviews or other data collection activities. Data collection will occur at multiple points in time during the course of the pilot project. Individual data is expected to be collected from about 50 students per school.

Evaluation: The selection process of SFAs for participation in the pilot project is outlined in Attachment A: Evaluation Criteria and Site Selection.

Attachment A

Evaluation Criteria and Site Selection

Up to 6 SFAs will be selected to participate in the School Breakfast Pilot Projects. SFAs wishing to participate in the School Breakfast Pilot must implement a universal-free breakfast program in a portion of their elementary schools and continue to implement a regular school breakfast program in an equal number of elementary schools. We invite applications from small, medium, and large SFAs. SFAs will be selected with the primary objective of representing a range of characteristics on a number of selection criteria. These SFAs will be both geographically dispersed and vary with respect to those SFA characteristics which are believed to be related to the outcomes of interest. In order to allow as many schools as possible to participate in Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) sponsored demonstrations, SFAs that are currently participating in FNS-sponsored demonstrations may not apply.

School districts with an interest in school breakfast pilot projects are encouraged to submit an application to their respective State Child Nutrition Director. This is a three-year pilot and SFAs willing to participate must be willing to commit to the entire three-year period. School districts must be currently participating in the School Breakfast Program, since the comparison groups in this pilot project will be schools providing traditional school breakfasts.

Site selection criteria will include, but is not limited to the following:

- Geographical location (FNS Region, State, urban/rural)
- School District size (enrollment, number of schools)
- Student participation (number of reimbursable meals, percent free/reduced-price meals)
- Staff resources (staff availability)
- Technological availability (POS, institutional management systems)
- Availability of school records (attendance, tardiness, disciplinary incidents)
- Student achievement (types of standardized tests used, grades tested, timing of the tests)